

Post Incarceration Syndrome (PICS)

**Understanding the Impact of
Incarceration and Pathways to
Recovery**

Learning Objectives

Define

- **Define PICS**

Recognize

- **Recognize common symptoms**

Understand

- **Understand trauma and institutionalization**

Explore

- **Explore recovery-supportive responses**

Reflection Question???

- **"What's one challenge you think someone might face during their first month after release from incarceration?"**
- **Please respond in chat or by raising your hand.**

"All of those are important. Today we will examine how many of these challenges are connected to trauma and institutionalization."



What is PICS?

**A cluster of
symptoms
experienced after
incarceration**

**Includes trauma,
institutionalization,
and social adaptation
challenges**

Historical Context

**Mass
incarceration**

**Long-term
confinement**

**Barriers to
reintegration**

"Behaviors that were adaptive inside may become barriers outside."

RELEASE

RE-ENTRY

HOW RECEIVED

RECEIVED WELL

REPLACEMENT

**REHABILITATION
HABILITATION
REFERRALS**

REINFORCEMENT

RECEIVED POORLY

**NEGATIVE
REINFORCEMENT**

**RESCIND,
REVOKE, REMOVE**

**RELAPSE/
RECIDIVATE**

RECOVERABILITY

RECOVERY

RECIPROCITY

Key Components of PICS

**"Why might
survival skills
learned inside
prison become
obstacles after
release?"**

Traumatic Exposure

- **Violence**
- **Threats**
- **Loss of control**
- **Chronic stress**

Institutionalization

- **Dependence on rigid structure**
- **Reduced autonomy**
- **Difficulty with independent decision-making**

Social Alienation

- **Isolation**
- **Distrust**
- **Disconnection from community**

The Role of Trauma



"Trauma occurs when an event or environment overwhelms an individual's ability to cope."

Imagine someone else determined when you wake up, eat, move, work, and sleep every day for ten years.

Institutionalization

**Dependence
on rigid
structure**

**Difficulty
making
decisions**

**Reduced
autonomy**

“What might happen when those decisions suddenly become yours again?”



Common Symptoms of PICS

Anxiety

Depression

Emotional numbing

Social withdrawal

Hypervigilance



Hypervigilance and Safety

**Constant scanning
for threats**

Difficulty relaxing

Sleep disturbances

Symptom Review

Emotional

- **Anxiety**
- **Depression**
- **Shame**
- **Hopelessness**

Behavioral

- **Isolation**
- **Avoidance**
- **Emotional withdrawal**

Cognitive

- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Distrust**
- **Negative self-beliefs**

Physical

- **Sleep problems**
- **Chronic Stress Reactions**

Identity and Self- Worth

Shame and stigma

**Damaged self-
concept**

Fear of failure

Relationships and Family

Rebuilding trust

Role changes

**Communication
challenges**

"Symptom or Survival Skill?"

You get to decide whether the behavior is:

- **A. Problem Behavior**
- **B. Survival Adaptation**

Examples:

- **"I sit facing the door in restaurants."**
- **"I avoid large crowds."**
- **"I don't trust authority figures."**



Employment Barriers

Criminal records

**Work history
gaps**

Discrimination

Housing Challenges

- **Limited options**
- **Financial barriers**
- **Community restrictions**





PICS and Substance Use

- **Self-medication**
- **Recovery challenges**
- **Co-occurring disorders**

Mental Health Considerations

PTSD symptoms

Depression

Anxiety disorders

Suicidal ideation risk

Protective Factors

Social support

Employment

Housing

Peer support

Purpose and belonging

Role of Peer Support

- **Lived experience**
- **Hope**
- **Advocacy**
- **Connection**



Trauma- Informed Responses

Safety

Trustworthiness

Choice

Collaboration

Empowerment

Case Study Activity

- **Small group discussion**
- **Identify symptoms**
- **Develop support strategies**



Post Incarceration Syndrome (PICS) Case Study

- **Case Study: Michael's Return Home**
- **Background**
- **Michael is a 42-year-old man who was released from prison six months ago after serving a 15-year sentence. Prior to incarceration, Michael struggled with substance use and had limited employment history. During his incarceration, he completed vocational training, maintained employment within the facility, and participated in substance use treatment programs.**
- **Upon release, Michael moved into transitional housing and was determined to "start over." Initially, he was optimistic and motivated. However, over time, he began experiencing difficulties adjusting to life outside prison.**

Current Situation

Michael reports feeling overwhelmed by everyday decisions. Simple choices such as selecting food at a grocery store or managing his daily schedule cause significant anxiety. He often states, "Everything was easier when someone told me where to be and what to do."

He has become increasingly isolated from family and friends. Although his sister regularly invites him to family gatherings, Michael frequently declines. He explains that crowded environments make him uncomfortable and that he constantly feels the need to watch what is happening around him.

At night, Michael struggles to sleep. He often wakes up suddenly after hearing noises outside his apartment. He checks windows and doors multiple times before going to bed and feels uneasy whenever someone approaches him unexpectedly.

Michael recently obtained part-time employment but quit after three weeks. He felt his supervisor was "watching him" and interpreted routine feedback as criticism or disrespect. He now spends most days alone in his apartment.

His probation officer reports that Michael has remained compliant with supervision requirements but appears increasingly withdrawn and depressed. Michael has also expressed concerns that no matter how hard he works, society will always see him as "an ex-con."

Presenting Symptoms

Hypervigilance

Social withdrawal

Anxiety

Difficulty making decisions

Sleep disturbances

Low self-esteem

Distrust of others

Feelings of hopelessness

**Difficulty adjusting to unstructured
environments**

Strengths

Completed vocational training

Six months substance-free

Stable transitional housing

Positive relationship with sister

Compliant with supervision requirements

Expressed desire for a better future

Prior participation in treatment services

Trauma Considerations

Examples include:

Constant alertness

Difficulty feeling safe

Interpreting feedback as threats

Avoidance of crowds

Sleep disruption

Institutionalization Indicators

Examples include:

- **Difficulty making decisions**
- **Preference for highly structured environments**
- **Anxiety when faced with freedom and responsibility**
- **Dependence on external direction**



Recommended Supports

- **Peer support services**
- **Trauma-informed counseling**
- **Employment support programs**
- **Recovery support groups**
- **Family support and reunification services**
- **Housing stabilization services**
- **Cognitive-behavioral interventions**
- **Mentoring and community integration activities**

Building Recovery Capital

"Recovery and successful reentry are supported by resources known as recovery capital."

Four Domains of Recovery Capital

Social-Family, Friends, Mentors

Physical-Housing, Transportation, Employment

Human-Education, Skills, Health

Community-Recovery supports, Faith communities, Civic engagement

"What recovery capital resources exist in your community?"



SAMHSA- Aligned Key Messages

Recovery is possible.

Trauma is widespread.

Healing occurs through connection.

Peer support promotes hope.

Strengths-based approaches improve outcomes.

Successful reentry requires community support.

People are more than their criminal justice history.



Key Learning Point

Many behaviors that appear resistant, unmotivated, or antisocial may represent survival strategies developed during incarceration.

Understanding Post Incarceration Syndrome helps providers respond with empathy, trauma-informed care, and recovery-oriented support rather than judgment or punishment.

Key Takeaways & Discussion

**PICS impacts
reintegration**

**Recovery is
possible**

**Supportive
relationships
matter**